

February 10th, 2009

“Dilemma of Australian bushfires: Defend homes or outrun the flames”.

Tags: Environment, Global News, Global News Blog, breaking news, climate change, farmland, global warming

By Mark Bendeich

No matter how clever we become at predicting disasters, or how quickly we can respond to them, your last and best defence against an Australian bushfire could still turn out to be a good plan and plenty of courage to stick with it.

Anyone who has lived through a wild fire will understand why many Australian victims ignored advice at the weekend and tried to flee rather than stay with their homes as many had planned. At least 173 people have been confirmed killed in the fires, although the Australian newspaper said the toll may reach 230.

Bushfires don't sneak up on you. They hurtle over the horizon like express trains from hell, throwing up mountains of smoke blotting out the sun and driving waves of wildlife ahead of them.

Birds fall from the sky, deadly snakes race past your feet and kangaroos appear from nowhere, some badly burnt and all of them bounding at full speed away from the smoke and heat.

And then the front of the fire arrives, introduced by a terrifying roar, a deafening mixture of other-worldly howls and scream that would drown out the sound of a jumbo-jet taking off.

Embers rain down from the sky, which glows orange and grey, and the heat sucks the moisture from your eyes and makes it hard to breathe. The flames then bear down and you have a terrible choice: try and escape in your car or take refuge in your house.

Not surprisingly, a lot of people caught in the country's deadliest bushfires tried to escape. Tragically, many died.

Bushfire experts insist, even as the death toll climbs past 170, that you should stay inside and keep trying to defend your home as pitiful as those efforts might seem.

After more than 20 years, I remember well the last bushfire I covered as a journalist at close quarters. At the time, before journalists had to undergo fire training and be accredited to go near a bushfire zone. I was watching an elderly woman throw buckets of water at burning embers as they fell like missiles around her rural home outside Canberra.

That's when the fire front reared up close by and I panicked.

I ran for the car by the roadside, realising as I reached it that my colleague, a photographer, was not there. He had failed to react in time, deceived by the tunnel vision that comes with looking down a camera lens. Suddenly aware of the peril, he sprinted to the car, chased by smoke and flame, and we tore off.

We got out of there in the nick of time.

Now, as I cover this disaster, this time at a safe distance, I realise the old woman who had been tossing thimble-fuls of water on the feet of an inferno was actually doing what all rural folk are now trained to do: don't panic, prepare your property well and defend your home to the last.

As we fled, she went inside her house and both she and her house survived. The real miracle, according to the current orthodoxy of bushfire safety, is that we survived.

So why did so many people die in the latest fires, when two decades of fire-safety education told them to either evacuate at first sign of danger or stay and fight to the end?

Some politicians and residents believe these bushfires were so intense that staying and defending homes was not an option. Victoria state premier John Brumby, after seeing first-hand the sea of destruction, wondered aloud if the policy of "leave early and defend" was realistic in such an extreme case.

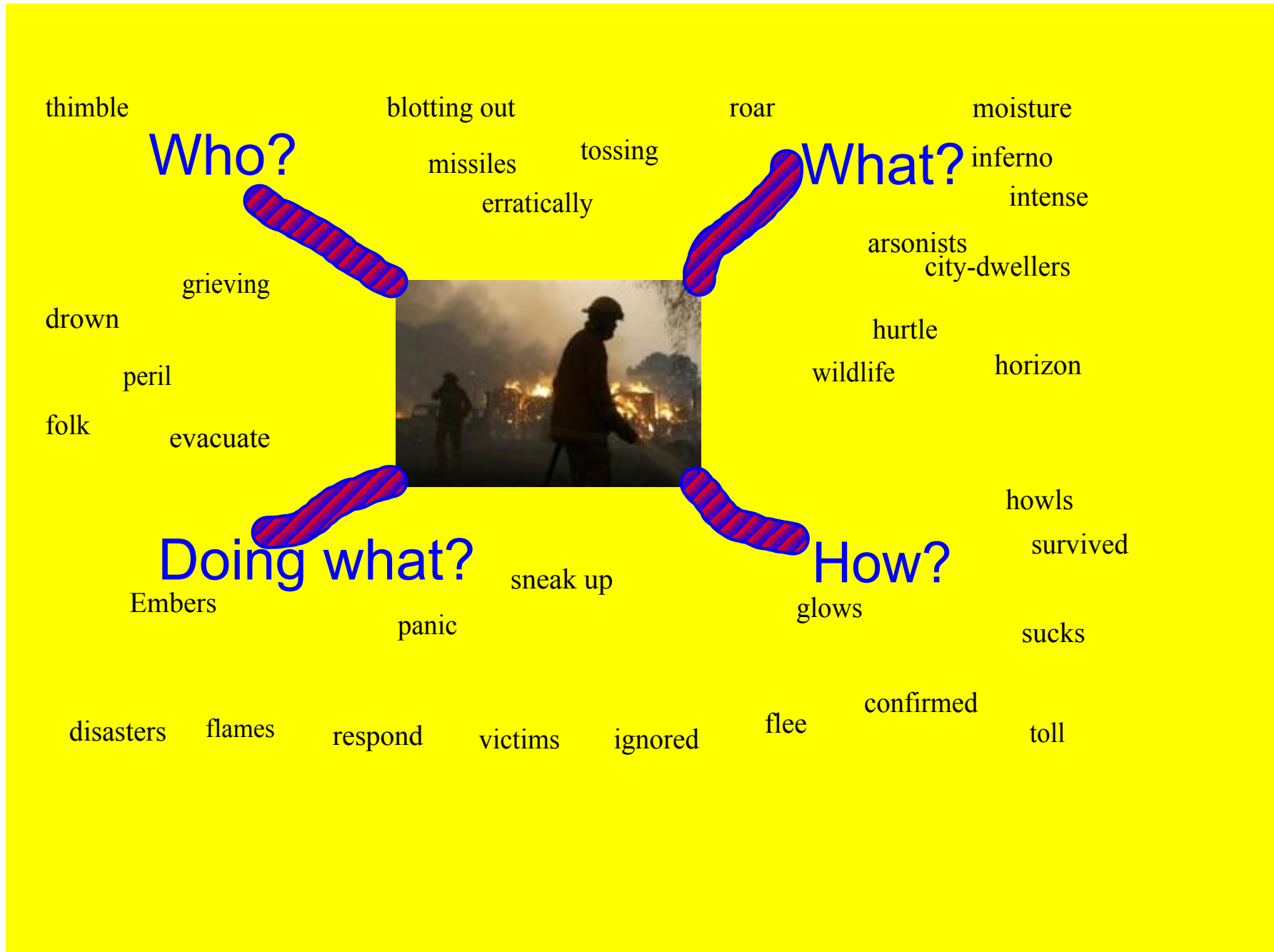
"There were many people who had done all of the preparations, had the best fire plans in the world and tragically it didn't suit them," he was quoted as saying in the Sydney Morning Herald.

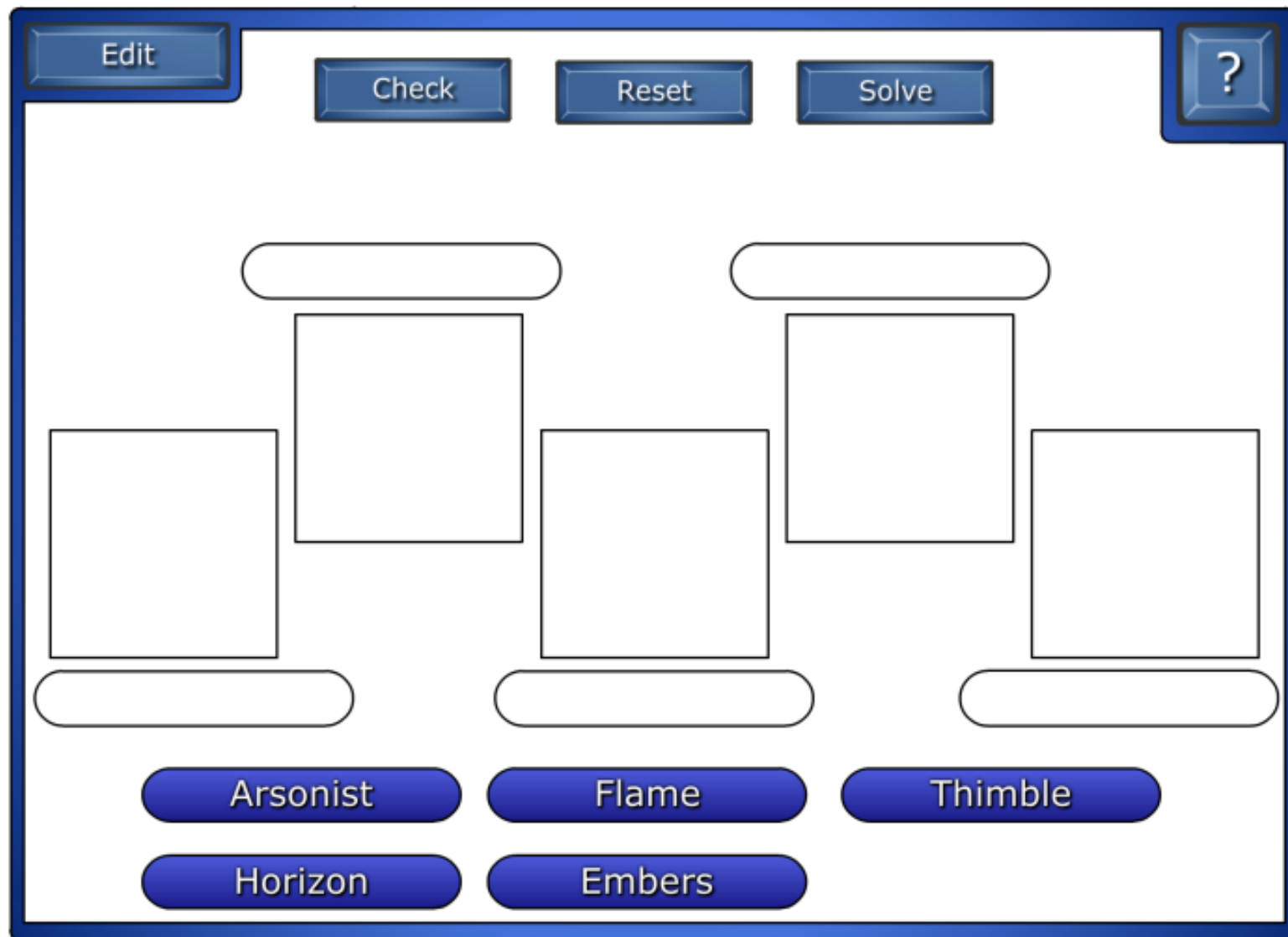
Bushfire experts are still not swayed, including "fire-behaviour specialist" Kevin Tolhurst who, while admitting there is no guarantee of survival in such extreme disasters, says the option of evacuating entire towns as fires race erratically across the landscape is no alternative to staying put.

"There's no way you could have evacuated all of the people, even if you had had almost unlimited resources," he said. "I think the general policy and direction is right, but I think we need to make sure it works better."

Right now, police are looking for arsonists suspected of lighting some of the fires and survivors are grieving, not debating fire safety or the question of global warming.

But as more city-dwellers shift to the countryside where housing is cheaper and the views are splendid, the question of whether to defend your home or try to outrun the flames will continue to burn for generations to come.





What word is missing?
Click on each tile to reveal the answer.

Edit

Reset

?

aware --- the peril	chased --- smoke	in the --- of time	first sign -- - danger	fight to --- end
was not --- option	respond --- them	plenty --- courage	sneak --- on you	blotting --- the sun
at --- speed	a lot --- people	as --- journalist	buckets --- water	to --- last

Edit

Check

Reset

?

Word	Description
	make a loud, deep noise
	throw something lightly and
	make a long, loud, crying sound
	give out a steady light
	lose control because you're
	feel sadness and sorrow
	go quietly and secretly
	rush violently and noisily

glow

howl

grieve

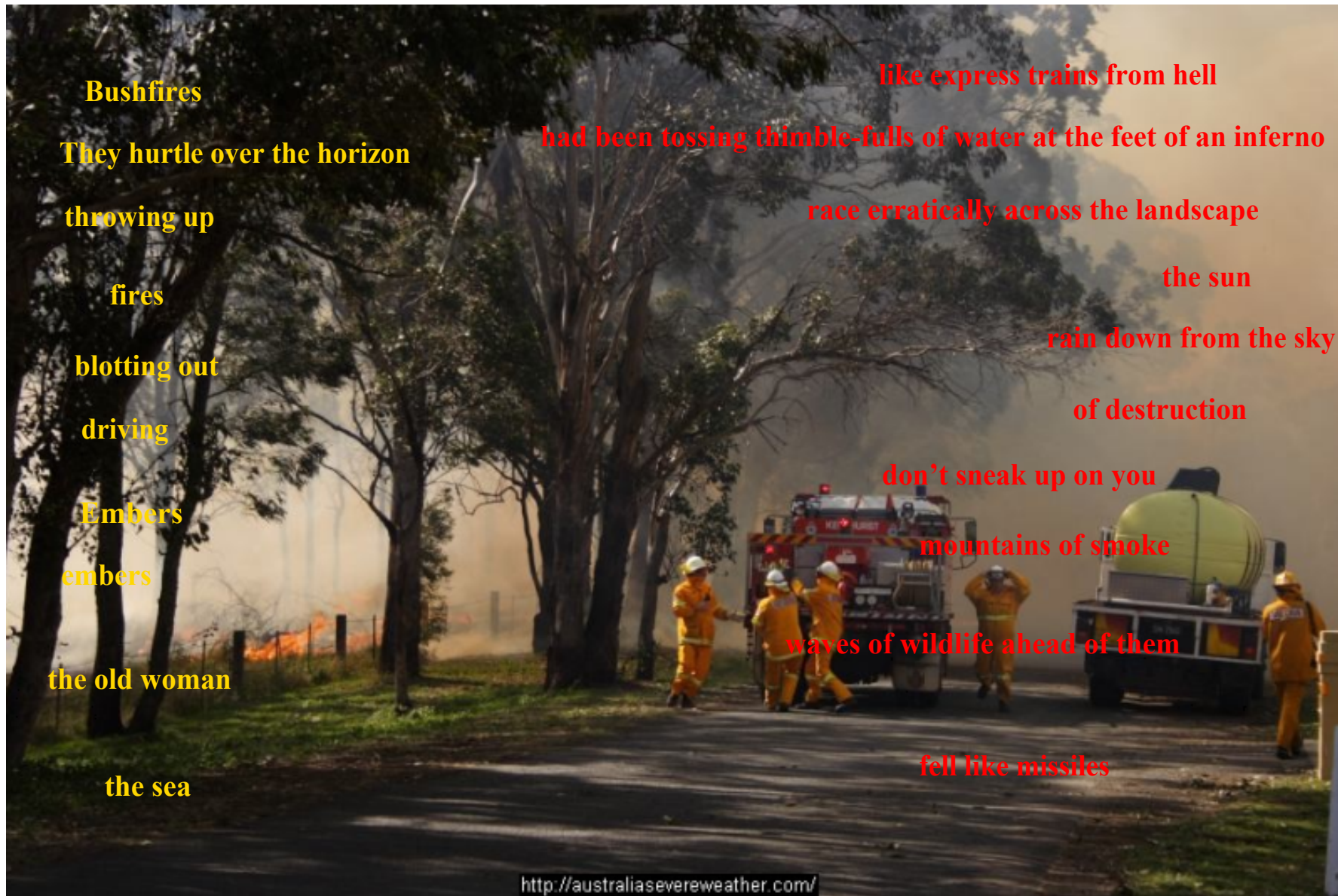
panic

roar

sneak

toss

hurtle



Bushfires

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throwing up

fires

blotting out

driving

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embers

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<http://australiasevereweather.com/>

